



## Early Journal Content on JSTOR, Free to Anyone in the World

This article is one of nearly 500,000 scholarly works digitized and made freely available to everyone in the world by JSTOR.

Known as the Early Journal Content, this set of works include research articles, news, letters, and other writings published in more than 200 of the oldest leading academic journals. The works date from the mid-seventeenth to the early twentieth centuries.

We encourage people to read and share the Early Journal Content openly and to tell others that this resource exists. People may post this content online or redistribute in any way for non-commercial purposes.

Read more about Early Journal Content at <http://about.jstor.org/participate-jstor/individuals/early-journal-content>.

JSTOR is a digital library of academic journals, books, and primary source objects. JSTOR helps people discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content through a powerful research and teaching platform, and preserves this content for future generations. JSTOR is part of ITHAKA, a not-for-profit organization that also includes Ithaka S+R and Portico. For more information about JSTOR, please contact [support@jstor.org](mailto:support@jstor.org).

## THE BLACK DEATH, AND ITS LESSONS FOR TO-DAY

BY PROFESSOR T. D. A. COCKERELL

UNIVERSITY OF COLORADO

WE are often told that the present European war is the greatest calamity the world has ever known, and as such, it paralyzes the minds of men, whose normal reactions are totally inadequate in the presence of such extraordinary conditions. Future students of the history of the twentieth century will read the chronicle with despair or boiling indignation, according to their temperaments, asking why, in heaven's name why, were those people so utterly incompetent to do the simple things which might have prevented the catastrophe? In many respects, there is little resemblance between the fourteenth century and the twentieth, and less between the bubonic plague and war; yet it may not be unprofitable to consider that other enormous European calamity, of the years 1348-9, and its effects upon the stricken populations.<sup>1</sup> Although the cause of death and loss was different, the results were in many respects similar, and if the attempts of our ancestors to deal successfully with the situation now seem to us amazingly futile, we may at least ask ourselves whether we are exhibiting any better judgment to-day. In the fourteenth century the microscope was of course unknown, and it was beyond the powers of the wisest man to learn anything about the *Bacillus pestis* or its communication to man by the rat flea. At the same time, the uncultured people of many times and countries had reached sound empirical judgments; and the beginnings of science in remote antiquity had promised something better than the dominance of unreasoning superstition posing as religion. Was it not a fact that the cult of the ruling classes had so imposed itself on the masses that for centuries the free action of the mind, in observing relations between cause and effect, had been inhibited? Is it not a fact to-day that a similar cult, that of the necessity and propriety of war, acts as a like inhibitor to those mental reactions which might otherwise clarify the atmosphere and make easy the way to peace? The problem of the fourteenth century was a terrific one, as is our problem to-day. Even a partial solution would have required the utmost exercise of all the wisdom available; but the point is, that then as to-day, men cravenly ac-

<sup>1</sup> My principal sources of information have been Dr. F. A. Gasquet's "The Great Pestilence" (London, 1893), and Mr. Edgar Powell's "The Rising in East Anglia in 1381" (Cambridge, 1896).

cepted as inevitable what might conceivably have been prevented. Petrarch in Italy thus wrote to his brother in June, 1348:

Alas! my beloved brother, what shall I say? How shall I begin? Whither shall I turn? On all sides is sorrow; everywhere is fear. I would, my brother, that I had never been born, or, at least, had died before these times. . . . When has any such thing been ever heard or seen; in what annals has it ever been read that houses were left vacant, cities deserted, the country neglected, the fields too small for the dead, and a fearful and universal solitude over the whole earth? Consult your historians, they are silent; question your doctors, they are dumb; seek an answer from your philosophers, they shrug their shoulders and frown, and with their fingers to their lips bid you be silent. Will posterity ever believe these things when we, who see, can scarcely credit them? We should think we were dreaming if we did not with our eyes, when we walk abroad, see the city in mourning with funerals, and returning to our home, find it empty, and thus know that what we lament is real. Oh, happy people of the future, who have not known these miseries and perchance will class our testimony with the fables. We have, indeed, deserved these (punishments) and even greater; but our forefathers also have deserved them, and may our posterity not also merit the same.

In France, in many places, two thirds or more of the population died.

In many towns, small and great, priests retired through fear, leaving\* the administration of the sacraments to religious, who were more bold.

At the hospital in Paris, for a long time more than fifty corpses were carried in carts to burial daily. The devout sisters of the hospital, like those of to-day,

worked piously and humbly, not out of regard for any worldly honor. A great number of these said sisters were very frequently summoned to their reward by death, and rest in peace with Christ, as is piously believed.

The chronicler (William of Nangis) notes disastrous after effects:

Alas! the world by this renovation [after the plague] is not changed for the better. For people were afterwards more avaricious and grasping, even when they possessed more of the goods of this world, than before.

Moreover, all things were much dearer; furniture, food, merchandise of all sorts doubled in price, and servants would work only for higher wages.

Philip VI. of France did indeed at the eleventh hour take a wise step. He called the medical faculty of Paris together to consult as to methods for combating the disease. Apparently the only advice the doctors could give was to avoid the sick. The king of Sweden, Magnus II., was more in accord with the spirit of the times. He issued a preparedness proclamation, advising every one to abstain on Friday from all food but bread and water, "or at most to take only bread and ale," to walk with bare feet to church, and to go in procession around the cemeteries carrying the holy relics.

The approach of the plague to the shores of England soon caused

apprehension. The Bishop of Bath and Wells sent letters through his diocese ordering processions every Friday in each collegiate, regular and parish church, and granting an indulgence of forty days to all who, "being in a state of grace, should give alms, fast or pray, in order, if possible, to avert God's anger." The coast of Dorsetshire seems to have been the first part infected, but the disease spread rapidly through the country. Gasquet remarks: "it is curious to observe how closely the epidemic in this country clung to the rivers and water-courses," a suggestive observation now that we know the connection of the disease with rats. "The mortality," says the same writer, "attacked the young and strong especially, and commonly spared the old and the weak"—its effects here being comparable to those of war. Just as to-day, Oxford and Cambridge were depleted of their students; and although to-day we honor and admire the many hundreds of young men who have left their colleges to fight for their country, we may no less than the men of the fourteenth century deplore the deaths of so many of those who were expected to lead the intellectual forces of the nation. In the earlier period, when the universities existed primarily for the education of the clergy, the loss fell upon the church, which suffered in many ways; to-day the injury will necessarily be more general, and if less conspicuous, no less serious. Dr. Gasquet, in a most interesting and instructive final chapter, sums up "some consequences of the great mortality." These consequences were good and bad, but of tremendous importance in either case. From the Norman conquest up to the middle of the fourteenth century, the nobility and gentry conversed in French, and their children were taught in that language. A schoolmaster named Cornwall introduced English into the instruction of his pupils, "and this example was so eagerly followed that by the year 1385, when Trevisa wrote, it had become nearly general." This change, the author suggests, could never have been effected had not the plague carried off so "many of those ancient instructors," that the opposition to it could be overcome. Thus was the English of Shakespeare made possible.

In architecture, the effects of the epidemic are still visible to-day. In many cases buildings which had been begun were never finished; or if finally completed, it was in another style which had since come into vogue. There is similarly a break in the development of stained-glass manufacture; first an interval, and then the resumption of work showing a change of style.

The tremendous shock to people's minds and habits produced a reaction which, in the long run, led to good results. But the disorganization let loose much evil, and Gasquet is obliged to state:

It is a well-ascertained fact, strange as it may seem, that men are not as a rule made better by great and universal visitations of Divine Providence.

It was noted of the great plague in the reign of the Emperor Jus-

tinian, that "whether by chance or Providential design it strictly spared the most wicked," and it was "the universal testimony of those who lived through" the period of the Black Death, "that it seemed to rouse up the worst passions of the human heart, and to dull the spiritual senses of the soul." Nevertheless the author is able to present a better side, and his words are so eloquent and so significant for modern times that I quote at length:

In dealing with this subject it is difficult to bring home to the mind the vast range of the great calamity, and to duly appreciate how deep was the break with then existing institutions. The plague of 1349 simply shattered them; and it is, as already pointed out, only by perpetual reiteration and reconsideration of the same phenomena that we can bring ourselves to understand the character of such a social and religious catastrophe. But it is at the same time of the first importance thoroughly to realize the case if we are to enter into and to understand the great process of social and religious reedification, to which the immediately succeeding generations had to address themselves. The tragedy was too grave to allow of people being carried over it by mere enthusiasm. . . . It was essentially a crisis that had to be met by strenuous effort and unflagging work in every department of human activity. And here is manifested a characteristic of the middle ages which constitutes, as the late Professor Freeman has pointed out, their real greatness. In contradistinction to a day like our own, which abounds in every facility for achievement, they had to contend with every material difficulty; but in contradistinction, too, to that practical pessimism which has to-day gained only too great a hold upon intelligences otherwise vivacious and open, difficulties, in the middle ages, called into existence only a more strenuous and more determined resolve to meet and surmount them. . . . Many a noble aspiration which, could it have been realized, and many a wise conception which, could it have attained its true development, would have been most fruitful of good to humanity, was stricken beyond recovery. Still no time was wasted in vain laments. What had perished was perished. Time, however, and the power of effort and work belonged to those that survived.

Subsequent to the plague of 1348-9, and its recurrence in 1361, the conditions of labor were greatly altered, in ways presenting an interesting parallel to what we see going on to-day. Mr. Edgar Powell, in his account of "The Rising in East Anglia in 1381," takes up this phase of the subject, giving many details. In the rural districts great numbers, in some places nearly one half, of the population had been swept away, and naturally the supply of labor was extremely scarce. This led to a demand for higher wages, but the landowners, quite unable to adjust themselves to the new conditions, resisted by every means in their power. They even secured legislation establishing—not the minimum wage we hear so much of to-day—but a *maximum* wage, with punishments for all those who gave or received more. The principal result of this was to exasperate the working classes, who were further infuriated by the severe penalties which the law permitted; even, if the prosecuting individuals desired, extending to branding the foreheads of those convicted. Added to all this, came the heavy burden of the poll-tax, which was the final

and immediate cause of revolt. New ideas of liberty, fraternity and equality, the germs of our latter-day socialism, filled the air; and those who began by rebelling against an excess of injustice, now looked forward to a veritable heaven upon earth. William Morris, in his "A Dream of John Ball" (1890), has given us an idealized version of the rebellion, centering about the personality of that "rascal hedge-priest" John Ball, who seems to have chiefly represented the idealism and intellect of the movement. "Yea, forsooth," Morris supposes Ball to say, "once again I saw as of old, the great treading down the little, and the strong beating down the weak, and cruel men fearing not, and kind men daring not, and wise men caring not; and the saints in heaven forbearing and yet bidding me not to forbear; forsooth, I knew once more that he who doeth well in fellowship, and because of fellowship, shall not fail though he seem to fail to-day, but in days hereafter shall he and his work yet be alive, and men be holpen by them to strive again and yet again; and yet indeed even that was little, since, forsooth, to strive was my pleasure and my life."

The revolt was crushed, and had it not been, it could not have accomplished its proper purpose. Time was needed for that, but the old condition of affairs never quite returned, and much of what we cherish most to-day had its remote beginnings in that apparently fruitless struggle. After the present war, in the readjustment which must necessarily take place there will be opportunity and necessity for reform. Will it be possible to approach the problem with an eager desire to make the best of the situation, or will those in power stubbornly resist every fundamental change? In particular, can we throw off the burden of militarism by appealing to the intelligence and good-will of mankind; or will the populace, finally goaded to desperation, be driven to revolution? As in the fourteenth century, we are borne on the crest of a wave which we can not stem; up to a certain point, we are compelled by the course of events,—but it will make all the difference in the future whether we now approach our problems intelligently or with ignorance and prejudice. A great catastrophe, whether plague or war, breaks many links with the past, and gives the surviving generation new power and new opportunity. Thus, to an unusual extent the deeds of that generation affect those to come, and heavy is the responsibility if a false start is made.

An apparently good authority (Hecker) estimated that in the fourteenth century the bubonic plague destroyed about twenty-five millions of persons, with the various results briefly indicated above. Yet historians have been so blinded by the political and military aspects of history that they have been unable to sense the significance of these tremendous events. As Gasquet remarks,

Judged by the ordinary manuals, the middle of the fourteenth century ap-

pears as the time of England's greatest glory. Edward III. was at the very height of his renown. The crushing defeat of France at Crecy, in '1346, followed the next year by the taking of Calais, had raised him to the height of his fame. . . . It is little wonder, then, that the Great Pestilence, . . . coming as it does between Crecy and Poitiers, and at the very time of the creation of the first Knights of the Garter, should seem to fall aside from the general narrative as though something apart from, and not consonant with, the natural course of events.

Consequently Hume and others "dismissed the calamity in a few lines," and even J. R. Green, who had a more intelligent grasp of historical sequences, "deals with the great epidemic in a scanty notice only as a mere episode in his account of the agricultural changes in the fourteenth century." Will the historians of the days to come record the present era as one of glorious victories and splendidly dominant monarchs; or will they know what those now engaged in battle can not fully know, that the masses on both sides had a common cause and a common enemy?